

As Congress debates a law that would make legal distinctions between different kinds of immigrants and that would take a dramatic leap toward the establishment of a permanent “underclass”—a group of legal residents with work permits that allow them to live for no more than three years at a time in the United States, and without the right to bring family members here—it is important to reflect on some lessons of history, and to contemplate how social science researchers should be addressing the issues facing immigrants today.

The term “immigrant” evokes a paradoxical set of associations in the United States. On the one hand, schools drill home the idea that the U.S. is a “nation of immigrants,” and immigrant success stories are a resounding trope in the nation’s cultural consciousness. (This narrative of course denies the experiences of African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans who did not “migrate” to the United States.) On the other hand, as Santa Ana (2002) demonstrates through his discourse analysis of references to immigrants in California newspapers, the metaphors that are evoked in discussions of recent waves of immigrants run counter to this “immigrant pride” historical script—as indeed, they have *always* done.

The idea that the discourse of antagonism against immigrants is *new* is belied by history (Daniels, 1998; Gabacci, 2002). Further, discourses about immigrants since the birth of this nation have always been racialized; there have *always* been different “kinds” of immigrants and different sets of immigration experiences in the United States. In the first multi-national wave of immigration to the United States, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, racialized and class-based distinctions were made between “good” (mostly Northern European “white”) immigrants and “bad” ones (Southern Europeans and the Irish, who were *not* seen as “white”) (Ignatiev, 1996). Contemporary meanings of whiteness were constructed historically through political and social processes, with many struggles both within and between groups along the way (Jacobson, 1998; Omi & Winant, 1987). People were identified as “problems” on the basis of national identities in ways that are not unlike the deficit views that are directed toward racialized ethnic “minorities” in the current era. Ulin (1975), for example, exposes how working class Italo-American boys living in Winchester, MA in the mid 1900s were assumed to have inferior “intellectual equipment...goals, attitudes and general orientations” than their “Yankee” peers (p. v-x).

We can also learn from history when we consider the political moves that are being made to make *legal* distinctions between different kinds of immigrants in the current era. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and in the internment of Japanese during World War II represent earlier efforts to institutionalize distinctions between different groups and to create different categories of citizenship. Current proposals for immigration reform make class-based distinctions between kinds of immigrants, giving priority to education and wealth over family reunification processes; even more perniciously, they formalize a category of second-class citizenship through a limited-term “guest worker”

program which allows workers to live here for no more than three years at a time, without the full rights of citizenship and without their families. These are changes that could potentially set into place even greater racialized and class-based distinctions that divide immigrant communities among themselves and that could very well have long-lasting consequences in terms of educational opportunities, human development, family and community processes, and racial formation.

But the educational and information science research worlds have a long way to go in order to begin to recognize these complexities, because as things stand there is remarkably *little* attention to immigrants or immigration issues within the field. At the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association this year in Chicago, for example, there were only 51 (of some 2000) sessions that used the term “immigrants” or “immigration” as a key word. (And many of these papers did not appear to be centrally about immigration; they may have used the term as a descriptor for the subject population.) This contrasts with other fields, like sociology, where there are whole sections devoted to the study of immigration. Further, while other fields address immigration issues as issues directly related to the movement of people across geo-political borders (issues of integration into the dominant society, educational attainment, or psychosocial trauma, for example), in educational research, the almost exclusive focus of attention in immigrant-related issues has been on *language*. Indeed, the label that is most often used to describe populations with origins in other countries is that of “English Learners,” not immigrants. Sometimes studies of “English Learners” are focused on language issues, as the label would suggest. But often, this term is used as a code for immigrant, whether or not the researcher knows for certain the immigrant status of the students or their families.

Language issues are a huge consideration for the education of immigrants, of course, but there are many other aspects of the immigrant experience that also matter for learning and development. There are the cultural adjustments that are required of immigrant families to navigate U.S. schools, for example. There are psychosocial processes to consider, especially in families who have had to deal with separation and reunification during the immigration process. Citizenship and legal status factor directly into educational opportunities, as the recent surge of attention to undocumented college students has revealed. Some immigrants have ready access to highly skilled and high-paying jobs, while other immigrants pound the pavement to find jobs that few “Americans” will take. And there are differences both within and between groups on the basis of things that matter in the social world and that therefore impact on educational opportunities, such as skin color and phenotype.

As a field, we need to grapple more with the ways in which different elements of immigrant experiences and different aspects of immigrant identities play out in educational experiences. We need to make clear when we are addressing issues that are related to legal status, birthplace, the psychosocial adjustments sometimes induced by the traumas of immigration, the cultural

wealth and rich experiences that immigrant families bring to schools, previous educational experiences (in urban, rural or other contexts), cultural adjustments to life in the U.S., and/or dimensions of experience that are shaped by social class positioning, gender, race/ethnicity, phenotype, and language. We need to work at the intersections of these different dimensions of identity and experience as well as to consider how each aspect plays out in different social contexts and in relation to different sets of concerns. We need to understand the overlapping but *varied* ways in which discrimination against immigrant populations happens, and how inequities are forged both *within* and *across* groups. Again, this is imperative at this historical juncture. But our best way to prepare for the future, I would argue, is to learn from our own history—not the official history that we were taught to celebrate in school, involving metaphors of melting pots and salad bowls, and not a simple knee-jerk reaction to dominant discourses that declare, too simply, that “things are different today than they were in the past,” but rather, more nuanced, critical, and finely-graded historical analyses, involving careful considerations of continuities in processes of group differentiation, as well as change.

### References

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